

Exclusive for you
INTRODUCTION

by
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Steps to High Performance

Focus on
What You Can Change
(Ignore the Rest)

INTRODUCTION

How to Be a High Performer

Some people begin their careers with a clear performance advantage. They may be smarter than you, come from a better socioeconomic background, be physically attractive, or have helpful personality characteristics. Each of those factors is scientifically proven to help someone perform better than you. Those combined items predict up to 50 percent of anyone's individual performance, according to academic research.¹ Let's call those things the "fixed 50 percent" because they're largely unchangeable once we become adults.

Of course, there's no guarantee that someone with more fixed 50 percent qualities will be a high performer, but it means that some people begin with a clear head start. A great-looking, highly intelligent, naturally hard-working, not-too-offensive person from a middle- or upper-class background enters their career more likely than you to be a high performer. They may still fail miserably, but it won't be because they didn't start with a healthy advantage.

That's not fair, and it may make you believe that high performance at work is largely out of your control. But, fortunately, that's just the fixed 50 percent. You control every other factor that drives your performance, from your capabilities and behaviors to the size of your network to your personal development. We know about those factors thanks to thousands of researchers who have studied every possible performance driver, from goal setting to how we learn to the quality of our sleep. Let's call these combined areas the "flexible 50 percent"; you have the power to shape them at will.

The challenge for someone who wants to be a high performer is to sort through that overwhelmingly large amount of information, identify what really matters, and practically put it to use. *8 Steps* simplifies and focuses that voluminous research into what's scientifically proven to increase performance and how to apply it to be a high performer.

Why Be a High Performer?

A good place to start our discussion is to answer the question, "What's the benefit of being a high performer?" High performance will get you more of what you value, whether that's flexibility, power, opportunity, pay, or recognition. It creates the foundation for a successful career. It gives you access to parts of your company that you wouldn't otherwise see. These benefits happen because organizations love high performers. They understand that high performers create and sustain successful companies. They'll work hard to identify their best performers and give those outstanding employees more time, attention, development, and compensation to make sure that they're engaged and that they don't leave.

The company's additional investment is a smart choice because the science says that high-performing employees deliver anywhere between 100 percent and 500 percent more output than their average- or below-average-performing coworkers.² They contribute more, so they get more. That doesn't mean that average performers are worth less, but they are unlikely to receive the same investment as top performers.

As an employee, you should also care about being a high performer because it gets you closer to your next promotion. While there's no guarantee that you'll get the next big opportunity only because of your strong performance, you will be much better positioned than others.

If you think your organization is different, that it values everyone equally or that high performance isn't its primary concern, consider a recent study on corporate culture published in *Harvard Business Review*. In this study, more than 250 companies were asked to select their dominant culture style from among eight categories. Their choices included cultures dominated by caring, purpose, enjoyment, and others. In 89 percent of those companies, they defined their dominant culture style as "results."³ Results means performance. Culture styles like purpose or learning were selected by only 9 percent and 7 percent of respondents, respectively. This reinforces that almost every organization's primary concern is high performance.

I also know how much companies value high performance because I advise the world's largest and most complex companies on this topic. Our consulting firm creates strategies to identify high performers, develop them, and keep them highly engaged. Companies understand the massive benefits that high performers produce, and they want more of them, now. They want to invest in selecting and growing their best talent and to upgrade (that typically means fire) those who will never be high performers.

What's Really True about High Performance?

When you try to understand what's proven to increase performance, it's easy to be distracted by the daily barrage of nonscientific stories on the topic ("Relax Like a Pro: 5 Steps to Hacking Your Sleep") and the clickbait links that ask if actions like starving ourselves will make us more focused at work.⁴ (Note: the Yale University researchers' answer to that question was yes.) Those stories typically have little to do with real science, or they highlight a juicy finding or two out of context. Either way, they don't give you any practical guidance about how to apply those nuggets of information.

It pays to be cautious even when someone claims that something is "scientifically proven." In the *New York Times* best-seller *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell wrote a chapter based on scientific research that said anyone could master a skill with ten thousand hours of practice.⁵ The media broadly retold that story, and it's been cited more than six thousand times in scholarly books and articles. Unfortunately, it's not true, and other scientists quickly proved that less than one-third of someone's performance is due to their hours of practice.⁶

If you want to be a high performer, you need to be a cautious consumer of these claims. To assess whether a statement about high performance is believable, sort that statement into one of three categories—is it research,

science, or conclusive science? You'll need to decide which level of proof you require to believe a claim.

- **Research:** A consulting firm conducts a study and reports the results, often to support a product or service that it sells. Its findings may be true, but there's no independent verification. The consulting firm typically won't allow anyone to verify if its claims are true.
- **Science:** Someone conducts a carefully designed experiment to test a hypothesis (i.e., if we select job candidates based on their intelligence, we will get higher-performing employees). They publish their research process and findings in a peer-reviewed academic journal. Others can read about that experiment and draw their own conclusions about the findings.
- **Conclusive science:** Other scientists conduct the same experiment described tens or hundreds of times. Almost every time, the conclusions are the same. This is a very strong suggestion that the findings are conclusively true and is the strongest level of proof.

Each of the eight steps is based on conclusive science; I use the terms "science" or "research" in the book when referring to concepts or examples at those lower standards of proof. I've included hundreds of citations so you can review the actual research, science, or conclusive science that prove the eight steps.

The Eight Steps

What do you control that's scientifically proven to improve your performance? The conclusive science suggests eight steps that will help you be a high performer:

- Step one—Set big goals: Goals have incredible power to focus and motivate us; more focus and motivation positions you for high performance. I'll explain how to identify the few goals that matter and stretch your expectations for what you can deliver. You'll learn the ideal type of coaching that will help you hit your elevated performance expectations.
- Step two—Behave to perform: All behaviors are not created equal. You'll learn which behaviors you're most likely to display, how to avoid going off the rails, and how to change your behaviors to the ones that drive high performance. You'll also learn how to identify the behaviors that your company values most.
- Step three—Grow yourself faster: You're more likely to be a high performer if you're more capable in the areas your company cares about most. You'll learn the optimal balance of experiences, education, and feedback that will accelerate your development. You'll create your own personal experience map to accelerate and guide your development.
- Step four—Connect: The old saying isn't completely true, but who you know does matter, and the strength of your relationship with them matters even more. You'll learn how to build a powerful network inside and outside of work, even if your introverted nature makes that your number one fear.

- Step five—Maximize your fit: People deliver best when they “fit” their work environment; that means a misfit can turn a potential high performer into an average one. You’ll learn how to identify the scenarios in which you fit best and how to change your fit to improve your performance.
- Step six—Fake it: You may have heard or read about being a “genuine” or “authentic” leader. We’ll explain why being the “fake” you is sometimes a better choice for higher performance and how to adjust your behaviors to what’s ideal for success at different points in your career.
- Step seven—Commit your body: Your body plays a powerful role in your ability to deliver, and it’s the only performance lever that you completely control. You’ll learn how sleep supports great performance and the surprising performance effects of exercise and diet.
- Step eight—Avoid distractions: Understanding which advice—no matter how popular and how many books it’s sold—is simply not helpful can be a challenge. To that end, step eight is to know and avoid the performance fads that suggest easy answers to difficult performance questions that distract you from the proven steps.

I’ve been asked which topic I thought would make the book’s final list but didn’t. The answer is exercise. Before reading the voluminous research on exercise, I would have sworn that there was a strong relationship between being in great shape and being a higher performer. While being in poor shape will indirectly lower your performance through increased health issues, it turns out that more trips to the gym each week won’t meaningfully benefit anything other than your waistline.

The eight steps are straightforward but not easy. They require that you have the interest, commitment, and passion to be a high performer at work. If that's your vision, I'll help you achieve each step. A good starting point is to understand which steps you've already mastered and which you should practice to achieve. The eight-step quick audit will give you some insight (see table I-1).

TABLE I-1

Eight-step quick audit: Where are you today?

Instructions: Let's keep this simple: "Yes" means that you conclusively do this; "No" means that you don't.

The eight steps	
Yes/No	Performance mindset: I acknowledge that high performance at work requires additional time, effort, and personal sacrifice.
Yes/No	Step one—Set big goals: I have a few big, challenging goals at work and seek regular coaching to improve my performance.
Yes/No	Step two—Behave to perform: I understand how my personality and "derailers" affect my performance. I regularly seek insights to improve my behaviors.
Yes/No	Step three—Grow yourself faster: I have identified the specific experiences that will most accelerate my career growth and am in or actively pursuing the next key experience.
Yes/No	Step four—Connect: I regularly improve the strength of my key connections inside and outside my organization.
Yes/No	Step five—Maximize your fit: I know which capabilities and behaviors my company will value most in the next two to four years and am changing myself to better align with those needs.
Yes/No	Step six—Fake it: I adjust my behaviors as needed to optimize my performance rather than always trying to be the genuine me.
Yes/No	Step seven—Commit your body: I optimize my sleep and exercise schedules to support high performance and use science-proven strategies to compensate when I don't.
Yes/No	Step eight—Avoid distractions: I am a careful consumer of performance advice and only do what's scientifically proven to make me a high performer at work.
Where you answered no, list the top three steps in which you'd like to make progress. You can start reading any step, so consider reading these steps first.	
Priority area 1 is Step #_____	
Priority area 2 is Step #_____	
Priority area 3 is Step #_____	

What You Should Know about the Fixed 50 Percent

While the eight steps will make you a high performer, it's helpful to understand how fixed 50 percent factors like personality influence your behaviors and performance. Then you will understand which of the eight steps come naturally to you and which will require more effort. While the fixed 50 percent gives some people the *potential* for higher performance, it doesn't guarantee it.

For example, if you're in a one-hundred-meter race and three other runners start two, five, and ten meters ahead of you, each has a starting advantage. After the starter's pistol fires, preparation, motivation, and skill decide who moves how far, how fast. If you've trained harder, eaten smarter, and understand the mechanics of sprinting better than they do, you can make up their initial advantage and win the race.

Your intelligence, core personality, body, and socioeconomic background are the uncontrollable fixed 50 percent factors.

Your Intelligence

Blame your mom and dad for this one, but how smart you are (as measured by IQ) is about 50 percent inherited and predicts up to 25 percent of your performance.⁷ Intelligence is the single largest predictor of performance, and it's twice as powerful as any other element. The good news is that if your IQ is in the high average range (110–119 on an IQ test), you're likely smart enough to be a high performer in many situations. The average college graduate's IQ is 115.⁸ Higher IQ does matter more if your job is more complex (i.e., rocket scientist), but an IQ that's too high can make you a less effective manager.⁹

Intelligence is in the fixed 50 percent because it's largely hard-wired by the time we're in our late teens. We can still learn after that, of course, but our fundamental level of intelligence doesn't change in a meaningful way. If you believe that you know more now than you did when you were eighteen, that's true but irrelevant. Consider a computer's processing chip versus its memory chip. Its processing chip sorts through data so it can complete an activity and the chip can operate up to, but not higher than, its preset speed. That processing chip is like your intelligence—there is a maximum speed with which you can process information. Your computer's memory chip can store large amounts of information, and you can add more chips (more knowledge) to store even more information. Those memory chips are your knowledge. You can add more chips over time, but the speed with which you can process information (your intelligence) doesn't meaningfully change.

Your Core Personality

Another gift from your parents is your core personality, which, like intelligence, is about 50 percent inherited. Your core personality is shaped by what you've experienced through your early twenties, and it can change slightly over time, but it's largely set as you enter the working world.¹⁰

I use the term “core” personality because, while your core personality guides your behaviors, you still completely control your behaviors. For example, if you're naturally more extroverted, you might have been told early in your career that you speak a lot in team meetings and need to give others a chance to participate. You corrected that behavior, but it didn't change your core personality—you learned how to behave differently. Your core personality trait of being extroverted means you're naturally oriented to behave a

certain way, not that you're unable to behave differently. That *choice* of how you behave makes a critical difference between your core personality and how people experience you at work.

Your Body

Falling squarely into the “not fair” category is the fact that your body influences your ability to succeed. People who are tall as adolescents or adults have higher social esteem and performance, and earn an extra 1 percent to 2 percent of income for each additional inch they are above average.¹¹ Given this persistent and well-known relationship, some scientists have even suggested taxing tall people to balance out their unfair “unearned income”!¹²

Beauty matters, too, with more attractive people both earning more and being seen as more intelligent, even though there's little relationship between looks and smarts.¹³ Weight bias reduces the likelihood that heavier people will be hired and receive high performance ratings.¹⁴ Gender doesn't affect performance ratings; women typically receive slightly higher ratings than men but lower pay increases.¹⁵ Race bias occurs globally and, despite positive words and plentiful investments, is pervasive and not disappearing quickly enough.

Again, that's all unfair, but keep in mind that Mahatma Gandhi was five foot four, and rock star Bono is five foot seven. There's a relationship between height and income, but height doesn't perfectly predict your income. More women and minorities are (slowly) filling CEO positions. As for beauty, executive suites are full of high-performing people who will never grace the cover of *Vogue* or *GQ*. Continue to fight against all those other unfair biases, but work hard to master the controllable, flexible 50 percent.

Your Socioeconomic Background

Your socioeconomic background is one of the greatest predictors of your academic achievement; it predicts both future capabilities and the colleges and universities you're most likely to attend.¹⁶ If you attend a highly ranked school, you'll likely have higher-quality professors, more-intelligent classmates, and a greater range of job opportunities after graduation than someone who attends a lower-ranked school. That's unfair, uncontrollable, and not worth worrying about after graduation day.

The fixed 50 percent factors are powerful and largely unchangeable, but they're responsible for, at most, 50 percent of how you perform. There are probably hundreds of other obstacles to high performance at work—a bad boss, a challenging economy, unsupportive coworkers, bad luck—but the path to high performance remains. Looking at the flexible 50 percent versus the fixed 50 percent, it's clear that you control an amazing amount of your own performance (see figure I-1). If you execute the eight steps well, you can be an incredibly high performer at work and overcome any initial, fixed 50 percent disadvantages.

FIGURE I-1

The flexible 50 percent versus the fixed 50 percent

The flexible 50 percent (changeable)

- How you set goals
- How you behave
- How you develop
- How you network
- How you present yourself
- How you manage your sleep

The fixed 50 percent (unchangeable)

- Your intelligence
 - Your core personality
 - Your socioeconomic background
 - Your race/gender/basic physical appearance
-

On Becoming a High Performer

Some other things to consider on your journey to high performance include sacrifice and balance, high potential, relative performance, depending on yourself, and getting out of your own way.

Sacrifice and Balance

You can only achieve high performance when you have a high performer's mindset. That mindset is one of competitive edge and self-sacrifice, and prioritizing performance at work above your other options. The ongoing debate about the intersection of work and nonwork activities questions the possibility of "having it all." The premise that it's possible to have it all is challenged by any typical definition of "all." The pursuit of high performance means that you try to maximize your success at work. That makes it very difficult to also maximize any other time-consuming activity. You can slice your time pie any way you want, but a larger slice in one area requires a smaller slice somewhere else.

High performers typically work more hours than average performers. Simple logic explains why. If two equally skilled and motivated people engage in an activity and one person spends 25 percent more time on it, that person will produce more results, on average. The additional time they invest at work creates a virtuous cycle. More work means more learning has occurred, so that person becomes more capable and potentially a better contributor in the future. Her higher performance from her additional hours becomes known in the organization, so she receives additional opportunities to show her skills. She might get more exposure to senior leaders who can serve as sponsors or mentors. Her success isn't guaranteed because she's put in more hours,

but she will be more likely to succeed than those who work fewer hours.

Occasionally I hear the cry, “I’m really efficient at work. I get as much done in forty hours as others do in fifty hours.” That may be true, but it still comes at a cost. When people say they’re more efficient, they often mention how they avoid social activities like chatting with others in the breakroom or how they frequently work from home to avoid the distractions of the office. While these behaviors may make someone more efficient in the total hours they spend at work, they’re not building the important relationships they will need to succeed and advance in every organization.

In addition, if you accomplish the same amount of work in less time than your coworker, you’re not a high performer—you’re efficient. You haven’t delivered anything more than an average performer. You’re just a very fast, average performer. More hours invested means more time that you can spend on all the steps to high performance. Being efficient is great, but you still must do more and better than others to be a high performer.

High performance at work requires that you prioritize work performance over other activities. You can be flexible in how and where you apply these additional hours, but more hours, up to a point, are an essential ingredient in high performance.

High Performance Is Not High Potential

Many people confuse high performance (doing your job exceptionally well today) with high potential (being able to do bigger, more complex jobs tomorrow). While being a high performer is a necessary threshold for being considered high potential, it’s just the first step. High performance today only predicts high performance

tomorrow in similar situations. If you're a great coder today, you'll likely be a great coder tomorrow and maybe can learn other coding languages. Your strength in coding doesn't predict that you can manage other coders or lead an IT architecture team or excel in any other technical role.

Performance Is Relative

It's not just your own performance that makes you a high performer, but how your performance compares to others'. Let's assume that you and Susie have similar sales territories and identical products to sell. You hit 125 percent of your goal. Great job! Susie hits 150 percent of her goal. You had a great year, but Susie had a better year—she's a higher performer. That doesn't mean you should treat coworkers like competitors, but you should recognize the real standard of performance is measured by how it compares to the best results. You'll be evaluated not just for what you deliver but also relative to how others perform. That's going to be true throughout your life, and it's best to recognize and embrace that. You don't have to be the best at everything. Just remember that someone else is trying to be the best at anything that you do.

Depending On Yourself

You may believe that your company will (or should) give you the support, guidance, and tools to become a high performer. Some companies might and others might not, but it's a risky strategy to outsource your performance and success to your employer. The first step to take before any of the eight steps in this book is to acknowledge that you're accountable for your high performance.

Getting Out of Your Own Way

Do you know the comment, “He is his own worst enemy”? It’s a wonderful summary of how our brains sometimes work against us being high performers. Your brain’s core function is to ensure that you survive and, beyond its pursuit of food, shelter, and a mate, it works hard to preserve your self-image and self-esteem.¹⁷ Its attempt to preserve your self-image creates some very challenging barriers to improving your performance, including:

- We externalize failure: We’re prone to give ourselves credit for our successes and blame others for our failures. If you had a great sales year, it’s because you put in significant effort and worked hard on your interpersonal skills. If you didn’t meet your sales goals, it’s because the territory you were given was too large, too small, too poor, or too competitive. This self-serving bias makes it difficult to honestly assess our performance and behaviors.¹⁸
- We mistakenly assign intent to others’ actions: “Mary did that to make me look bad in the meeting!” is an example of how we assign a purpose to others’ actions, even though this may not have been the person’s intent. Mary likely said something in the meeting to prove a point she believed in and didn’t consider you when she said it. When we come to those false conclusions, it’s called fundamental attribution error; it can damage relationships and erode the interpersonal trust that supports our performance.¹⁹
- We ignore information that can help us perform: If we were perfectly rational human beings and wanted to improve our performance, we would carefully consider every piece of information we received about our performance.

Strangely, our brain works against us because it seeks out information that reinforces our self-image and ignores information that doesn't. We're surrounded by information that can help us perform better, but we often miss the opportunity to listen for it and apply it. That's called confirmation bias; it can give us a very inaccurate view of how we behave and perform and how others perceive us.²⁰

While these biases can trip up your performance, once you recognize them, you can radically reduce their influence. We'll highlight how to do this in step two, "behave to perform."

Achieve Your Theoretical Maximum Performance

Scientists who study the biomechanics of the human body give us a great benchmark for high performance at work—theoretical maximum performance. That is the theoretical maximum amount of weight someone can lift if their form, nutrition, adrenaline level, and so on is in perfect harmony. It's impossible to ever lift that amount of weight, but the concept of theoretical maximum can help us to understand that your maximum performance is far higher than what you deliver today.

For example, when the average Joe goes to the gym and lifts weights, the most weight he can lift is about 65 percent of his theoretical maximum. Highly trained athletes typically lift about 80 percent of their theoretical maximum. In Olympic competition, weight lifters often reach 92 percent or 93 percent of their theoretical maximum. That Olympian can lift about 50 percent more than the average person but, more importantly, almost 15 percent more than already highly accomplished athletes.²¹

Think about your performance at work in the exact same way. How close can you get to your theoretical maximum performance if you perfectly apply what we know about human performance? *8 Steps* is all about helping you go from strong effort to your theoretical maximum performance. When you finish this book, you'll understand which factors will help move you toward your theoretical maximum and how to best apply them. Like weight lifters, you'll learn that success isn't just about pushing harder to lift more weight but about optimizing every element of your drive, mindset, and capabilities to win.

Let's Get Started

You now know about the flexible 50 percent that you can control, the fixed 50 percent that you can't, and the new standard of theoretical maximum performance. *8 Steps* gives you the practical, science-based guidance and tools to reach new heights of performance as fast as possible. The advice you read will be very transparent: what works, what doesn't, and how to apply science to be a high performer. It's better to be shocked into reality now than waste years on the wrong tactics or in the wrong company. Not every boss or company will be honest with you about what it takes to be a high performer at work—I will.

Let's get started.

8 Steps to High Performance

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CHANGE (IGNORE THE REST)

Research shows that 50 percent of your work performance is predicted by fixed traits you can't control: smarts, looks, personality, and socio-economic class. **So to improve your performance and get noticed for that next promotion, you should focus instead on what you can control.**

Avoid the pseudoscience and follow the scientific proof to boost your performance by focusing on the 8 Steps:

STEP 1 | SET BIG GOALS: Deliver superior results

STEP 2 | BEHAVE TO PERFORM: Choose the right behaviors and avoid the wrong ones

STEP 3 | GROW YOURSELF FASTER: Accelerate growth of the most important capabilities from x to y

STEP 4 | CONNECT WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE: Your boss, mentors, peers, your network and more

STEP 5 | MAXIMIZE YOUR FIT: Adapt to your company's strategy and your manager's needs

STEP 6 | FAKE IT: Show up to work as a stylized version of you instead of the fully genuine you

STEP 7 | COMMIT YOUR BODY: Manage your body to maximize work performance

STEP 8 | AVOID DISTRACTIONS: Sharpen your skepticism of unproven performance fads

"Because it is research-based and includes self-assessments and tools to gauge your progress in realizing the performance you are trying to achieve, it is an application book of the highest level."

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